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FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG
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C O N F I D E N T I A L HONG KONG 004414

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2031
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SUBJECT: BEIJING-BASED UNHCR REPRESENTATIVE CALLS ON CONSUL
GENERAL CUNNINGHAM

REF: HONG KONG 3973

Classified By: Consul General James B. Cunningham. Reasons: 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Veerapong Vongvarotai, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Representative for China and Mongolia, discussed asylum and refugee issues with Consul General Cunningham on November 9. Vongvarotai, who was accompanied by Choosin Ngaotheppitak, Senior Protection Officer from the UNHCR Beijing Office, and Monique Sokhan, Head of the UNHCR Hong Kong Sub-Office, said he was in Hong Kong to pay courtesy calls on the Hong Kong Government (HKG) and was scheduled to meet later with officials from the Immigration Department and the Security Bureau. According to Sokhan, the HKG has been generally cooperative on asylum cases and she expressed hope that UNHCR and the Government would eventually sign a memorandum of understanding allowing the joint processing of refugees cases (see reftel).

12. (C) Since his September arrival in Beijing, Vongvarotai said he had been busy working with mainland counterparts on finalizing PRC refugee regulations and on resolving refugee status determination and resettlement issues for urban refugees (mostly from Pakistan, India, Africa and Sri Lanka) in China. While the resettlement process in China was not easy, Vongvarotai told the Consul General that they had "not had a lot of problems with China" on this issue. He noted that the PRC Government wanted to "control" the urban refugee situation before the start of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and was reportedly working on contingency plans.

13. (C) On the issue of North Koreans in China, however, Beijing continued to refuse to recognize this population as refugees, instead designating the majority as economic migrants, said Vongvarotai. The meeting participants discussed the role of organizations and individuals assisting North Koreans in seeking asylum, including one NGO rumored to be considering Hong Kong as a possible base for its operations. Vongvarotai opined that it was "not likely" that North Koreans would show up in Hong Kong and cited the strict border and immigration controls between China and Hong Kong as a major deterrent. While it was possible that a few North Koreans might show up in Hong Kong seeking asylum, Vongvarotai predicted that if North Korea conducted a second nuclear test which triggered large refugee outflows, they would likely flee to Mongolia via China or depart North Korea by boat. Based on this assessment, Vongvarotai said that he did not intend to raise the issue of North Korean refugees with the HKG.
Cunningham